

# A Different Kind of safari



One might not expect an abundance of gourmet food, wine and first class service in the African bush, but that's just what contributing writer Mary Schnack found at the Clearwater Lodges in South Africa.

BY MARY SCHNACK

In 1994, I booked a three-day safari on Africa's Masai Mara to take a "mental health break" from my work in Nairobi during the Rwanda Civil War. Although short in time, those three days changed my life. After enjoying a view of all the major wild animals on the vast plains, it was a rude awakening when I returned to my small beach neighborhood in Los Angeles. I longed to look out my window and see something other than concrete. That was the impetus to move my business and family to Sedona, Arizona, where I bought a sprawling house with a full panorama of red rocks.

So when I was contracted to speak at a conference in South Africa this past January, I eagerly planned another safari. This time, instead of a tent-cabin, I booked my stay at a five-star lodge through Relais & Chateaux, owned by Anne Cointreau-Huchon, who also owns Morgenhof Wine Estate outside of Capetown.

After the conference, I did a half-day visit with a client to a small game preserve near Petermaritzburg and became nervous about my upcoming five day safari. The small game preserve was not much more than a glorified zoo. Had I made a mistake forsaking the wide open spaces of the Masai Mara for a private game reserve?

The 110,000-acre Welgevonden Private Game Reserve, which borders the Marekele National Park, is a three-hour drive north of Johannesburg. The picturesque Waterberg mountains are the setting for Cointreau-Huchon's two unique lodges. Known as Clearwater Lodges, the Kudu Lodge is set out on an open savannah overlooking a watering hole and the Tshetshepi Lodge is set in lush indigenous trees alongside a stream.

Although totally different topography and

brush than the Masai Mara, the animal viewing was outstanding. I saw a leopard and a cheetah, both rare sightings. We saw large herds of elephants almost every day. We saw lions mating and a variety of antelope, giraffe, wildebeest, warthogs, baboons, rhinoceros and zebra. It may be hard to notice birds when there are so many big animals to see, but the reserve is also a bird-watcher's paradise.

The Kudu Lodge, where I stayed, has



The Kudu Lodge offers a balcony view of the watering hole, with a constant stream of animals to watch.

five rooms for 10 guests. All five rooms have indoor/outdoor showers and balconies which offer a private view of the watering hole. Every day I was treated to a constant stream of animals visiting the water, almost as if it was choreographed. I spent an hour one afternoon watching two rhinos having a playful fight. I saw baby zebra, wildebeest, warthogs and baboons—some less than two days old.

Kudu was designed for relaxation. In the setting of the African bush, one might not expect the abundance of gourmet food and wine, first class service, and a rare combination of luxury and simplicity with a mixture of opulence and humility. Between game drives, (when we weren't eating) I had the choice of working out in the small fitness center, swimming in the pool or—my usual selection—reading on




the balcony of my room. Of course, I got very few pages of my book read, as the animal parades to the water hole by far provided more entertainment than anything I was reading at the time.

The morning before I arrived, a zebra died a few feet behind my room. That



night, three hyenas began feeding on the carcass. The next day, two young male lions arrived to feed on the carcass. Excitement filled the camp (and a horrid smell)! With lions so close, I had to be escorted whenever I moved around the lodge's grounds. After the lions ate on the carcass for two days, the hyenas came back to finish it and before I checked out, there was no sign that there had ever been a zebra carcass there.

The Discovery Channel and Animal Planet combined will never match that.

**MARY SCHNACK** is the president of Mary Schnack Media Services, Inc. ([www.PRWorks.ms](http://www.PRWorks.ms)) and Communication Bridges ([www.CommunicationBridges.com](http://www.CommunicationBridges.com)). She can be contacted at 928-204-9834 or at [mary@communicationbridges.com](mailto:mary@communicationbridges.com). 

## If You Go

Mary Schnack booked her trip to Clearwater Lodges at [www.relais-chateaux.com](http://www.relais-chateaux.com). You may also call 1-800-735-2478 for more information. She recommends flying into Johannesburg and either renting a car for the approximately two-and-a-half-hour drive north to the game reserve or using a car service. The first class lodge staff will schedule the car service for you and take care of all the details. Rates at the lodge depend on the time of year for your visit, but range from about \$350 to \$600 a night, including gourmet food and wine. (Mary reports that there is no need to spend a dime once you get there.)



The Kudu Lodge was designed for relaxation. Guests are pampered with gourmet food, wine, and first class service.



The author (center) with Anne Cointreau-Huchon (left), owner of Morgenhof Winery and the Clearwater Lodges and Jo Schutten (right), managing director of Uni Travel in Capetown, South Africa.